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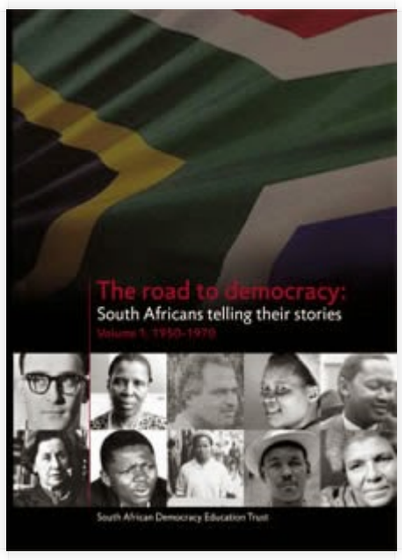
The story of Kholeka Thunyiswa - 'unknown' heroine of the South African struggle against apartheid

Kholeka Thunyiswa was among a group of nurses recruited by the ANC to go to Tanzania. She recalls their journey into exile, and work in various medical facilities in Tanzania, as well as the support they gave to the ANC in Tanzania.



I was born e-Korsten in Port Elizabeth in 1936. My father was a businessman and my mother a teacher. Our family was fairly well-to-do and we had houses in town, where we lived. We lost all the property. There was somebody known as Yusuf, who claimed he came from Abyssinia and travelled throughout the country wherever he felt he could make money. It turned out the man was a swindler.

He was telling people to sell their property and that if they did in a short space of time they would triple their profits. It was something like these pyramid schemes. My father was one of his victims. He sold his properties at the suggestion of this man, without the knowledge of my mother.

This affected my mother very badly. There was a rift in the family. We had to move because my father had sold even the house in which we were staying. This was around 1938-1939, when we came to stay in New Brighton with my mother and three sisters – my eldest sister was already married. We were not forcefully removed but later people were forcefully removed from that area of town. My father remained in Korsten.

I started high school in New Brighton. Then we met a Mr. Mkhize from Cape Town, who had come to attend a teacher's conference in Port Elizabeth. I went to pursue my studies in Cape Town at Langa High School, from Form 2 until matric. I stayed with the family of Mr. Mkhize, who was the school principal. The two families became very close.

When I completed matric, I went to Healdtown to take a two-year teacher's course. I did not like teaching. I did not teach long really. You know, I preferred to be a secretary but in those times we had very limited career opportunities. The only thing available was this teaching and nursing.

I applied to nursing school. I did my general nursing at King Edward Hospital in Durban from 1957 to 1959. I came back to Port Elizabeth to do midwifery from 1959 to 1961. Then this thing of going into exile cropped up.

UTat' uGovan Mbeki came to talk to me at home. He said he wanted highly disciplined people who won't let him down. He and Raymond Mhlaba were the main organisers in Port Elizabeth. From Port Elizabeth it was me, Nomgabazo, Mary Jane Socenywa, Nosipho Mshumbela and Victoria Magodla. We met – in fact I only met Nosipho and Victoria – for the very first time during the trip. We were recruited as individuals not as a group. That was in 1961.

We travelled to Johannesburg, where ANC officials collected us and took us to some place in Fordsburg belonging to some Asian or white where we were supposed to converge. My sister, Edith, came – I did not know that she was in the same group – and when she saw me she said: "This is a dangerous trip. You had better go back home. How will Mama feel if anything happens to both of us?" I said: "You better remain. I do not even know that the boss back home knows you have been recruited, too." My family had no knowledge that Edith had also been recruited. If Mama had known, I would not have gone. I told her she had better remain behind in Johannesburg, where she was working. The situation was tense because if there was a leak, we could have been sent to prison, like the others who ended on Robben Island. It was a difficult situation but eventually we left together.

From Johannesburg we left in a kombi driven by this white student. We did not have travel documents. He manoeuvred everything for us to cross the border. He told us: "Some of you should wear your uniforms perhaps so that if necessary I can tell them that there is an outbreak of disease in Botswana and I am taking you there to help." So when the guards came we told them this story and the gates were opened. The minute we went through, what excitement! This young chap, shame, who was disguised as a missionary, took off his collar. I think he was about twenty-one years old. When we arrived, he said to us: "I am happy to have brought you here safely. Do not worry about what might happen to me when I go back." He came back to South Africa after dropping us.

We arrived in Bechuanaland let's say today and the following day the news was in the papers, including the conversation which I had with Edith. We do not know who leaked the news. Someone from the Johannesburg group might have brought a friend when we left, a reporter perhaps, despite the fact that we had been warned that we should not come with friends to see us off, not even boyfriends. But some people did, which surprised us and we wondered: What is wrong with people? Do they want to put us in trouble?

We were supposed to leave for Tanganyika but somehow there was a big delay. We were becoming frustrated, you know, and beginning to run short of cash. We lived in one big house – government quarters and the ANC provided food. Initially there were twenty-one nurses but one dropped and decided to come back whilst we were in Bechuanaland. I do not know what happened; suddenly she changed her mind. Eventually word came from the Tanganyikan government, apologising for the delay because of the independence celebrations.

We left on the 18th of January 1962 – just ourselves and the crew of the Tanganyikan plane; a special plane. In Tanganyika (now Tanzania) we were met by officials from both the ANC and the Tanzanian government. The Tanzanian Minister of Health and O. R. Tambo were both there.

Disgruntled white nurses were threatening to leave the country, saying: "Let's see how they are going to manage the hospitals without us." Few local people were educated then. So when the government got wind of this information, they decided to talk to the leadership of the ANC. This was top secret. Those white people were shocked when we arrived. They had not been told about these plans.

When we first came, we were all placed at the main hospital then known as Princess Margaret Hospital. After independence it changed its name. We worked for about two weeks at the main hospital just to familiarise ourselves. Then we were posted to different stations around the country.

At Nyirinda/Maringa, where two of us were posted, there were about eight white nurses preparing to leave. They hardly stayed three months with us. They left a job that had been done by eight people to two of us plus an administrator sent by the Ministry. Those whites had done little for the Africans and squandered government money. When they arrive for work, at eight o'clock already they are taking breaks, drinking coffee and smoking. Conditions were very poor. There was a serious lack of materials such as cotton wool and bandages. If you want to do dressings, you have to improvise. You go to the wards, you find patients sleeping in beds smelling of urine. When you take rounds with the local nursing assistants you find out that patients have not been washed. I used to ask them: "Why are you doing this to your own people?" They said that white nurses earned more money for doing nothing.

I used to challenge the local nursing assistants and say: "These are your people, you play your role. These white people are here today and gone tomorrow. So you cannot let locals to suffer because of them." It was a great challenge, I tell you, to change their mindset. After a month, when the white matron took rounds, she says to me: 'Sister, now they are listening." She was trying to imply that they are working now because there are black nursing sisters around. Then I said to her: "Look, if you do not demonstrate to them and show them what to do they won't do things any differently. You have never told them what to do."

At our hospital, cooperation from and the attitude of the local nurses was very good. They did not complain. But Sis Nobantu Socenywa's station at Mwanza had so many problems and there was so much tension that the Minister of Health had to intervene; carried out a probe and suspended some people. Whites were telling them: "These people have come to take your positions." Sis Nobantu and her colleague had wanted to be transferred to another place. But at our hospital even our boss, Dr. Clark, a white man, told an Asian, who was our neighbour: "These are well trained nurses. You can see the changes they have made in the hospital in a short space of time, unlike my people from Europe." *Hayi, yena*, shame, he condemned those white nurses.

In terms of the conditions of employment, we thought we would be taken as expatriates only to be told that we were Africans in an African country and do not qualify for expatriate terms. I signed a three-year contract to start with; then I renewed it. When I got married, however, I was put on local terms; then I got a permanent contract and was transferred in 1965 to Dar-es-Salaam. Some of us went to London, the United States, and Uganda to look for greener pastures. Out of twenty only seven remained dedicated to Tanzania, where we worked for the public health system. We used to assist medical services *ze*-ANC, too, and visited the sick in ANC residences and government hospitals. I never thought of leaving Tanzania. I was satisfied in the situation in which I was; there were no regrets.

My mother came to visit in 1964. One of the secretaries saw an elderly woman at the bus terminus. He ran to my house. He says to me: "Sister, I saw somebody who looks very much like you; I think that is your mother." I was so excited. I had this boyfriend, whom I eventually married in 1967, and together we drove to the bus stop. I did not know she was coming and the people in Dar-es-Salaam did not phone to tell me she was coming but simply pointed her to a bus and told her to ask around when she arrived at the hospital. She had funded the trip from South Africa from her own pocket. It was clear to my mother that I would not return to South Africa. She came twice again during the 1970s.

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[1] Interview conducted by Brown Maaba, 1 October 2002, New Brighton, Port Elizabeth, SADET Oral History Project.

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